Sikandar

Those period pix

Kitne door, kitne past... the top ten movies set in the bygone eras

Suddenly this year, period films seem to be in. *Lagaan* and *Gadar* have already been released. *Asoka* is on its way and more are in the pipeline.

If Shah Rukh Khan can play Asoka, other heroes are more than likely to pick historical characters who suit their personalities.

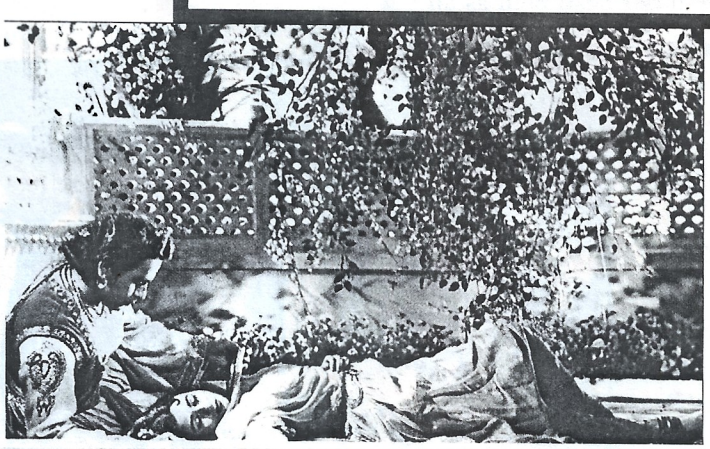
Time was when mythologicals, historicals and extravagant costume dramas were the rage actually—like *Ram Rajya*, *Sant Tukaram*, *Prithvi Vallabh*, *Humayun*, *Prithviraj Chauhan*, *Halaku*, *Sikandar*, *Taj Mahal* and *Lal Qila*.

Gradually the trend faded as film-makers conjured up other stories to tell. In recent years, even historicals set in the 1900s have fallen out of favour, with just a *Tamas*, *1942: A Love Story*, *The Making of A Mahatma*, *Sardar* or *Babasaheb Ambedkar* popping up sporadically.

Since there has been a glut of period and costume TV serials (mostly tacky) in any case, the audience obviously didn't crave more.

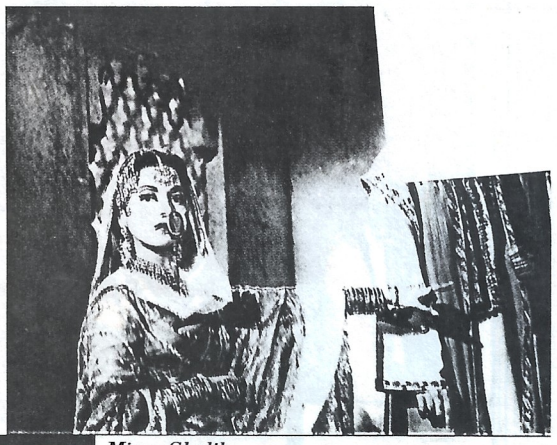
But for a film-maker there is still something challenging about recreating a period, of creating a piece of work on a grand canvas, of portraying how the past must have been.

Here's a list of 10 personal favourite period films, the only common factor being the protagonists who're placed in either a historical or semi-fictional milieu:



Mughal-e-Azam

Shaheed



Mirza Ghalib

SIKANDAR (1941)

Sohrab Modi was the master of costume extravaganzas. *Sikandar* is set in 326 B.C. when Alexander The Great aka Sikandar (Prithiviraj Kapoor) marched into India after conquering half the world.

Sohrab Modi played King Porus who gives him a tough fight. Eventually, Porus loses his son and is captured. He is brought in chains before Sikandar; the verbal duel that follows is brilliant. Impressed by the unflagging courage of Porus, Sikandar releases him.

The film was enmeshed in censor trouble during the British rule because of its nationalistic fervour scattered throughout the dialogue. The film still remains a fine example of Parsi Theatre-inspired booming drama.

Modi's *Pukar,* revolving around Emperor Jehangir's principles of justice, is another masterpiece in this genre.

JHANSI KI RANI (1953)

Sohrab Modi gets credit for India's first Technicolour film.

For *Jhansi Ki Rani,* Modi had technicians flown in from Hollywood. His wife Mehtab starred as the famed Queen of Jhansi who battled the British during the Mutiny of 1857. Modi played Rajguru, her advisor.

The film was historically accurate and made with Modi's usual majestic style, but it flopped and almost wiped out Minerva Movietone. Today it is acknowledged as a classic and a remarkable example of a filmmaker's spectacular vision.

MIRZA GHALIB (1954)

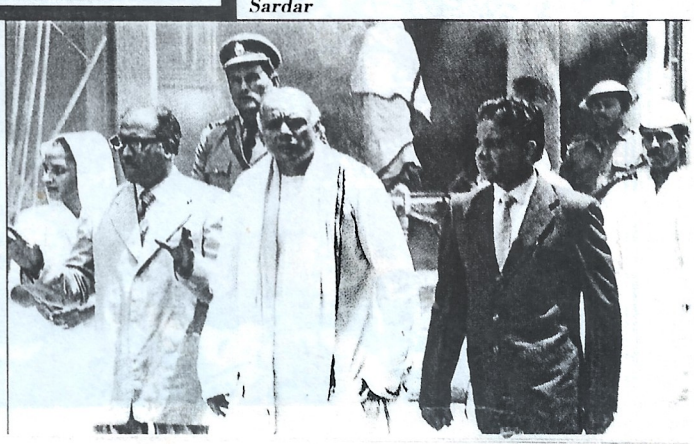
Sohrab Modi makes it to the list again for his award-winning bio-pic of the legendary poet *Mirza Ghalib.* Bharat Bhushan played Ghalib, with Nigar Sultana as his unhappy wife and Suraiya as the courtesan who loves him.

The film won the President's Gold Medal for The Best Film of 1954. The film (written by Rajinder Singh Bedi, Sadaat Haasan Manto and J.K. Nanda) captured the mood prevalent during the reign of Bahadurshah Zafar, the last emperor of Delhi, and had great music by Ghulam Mohammed.

This was one of Suraiya's last films and she gave it her best, both as an

Bharat Bhushan may not have made a very convincing Ghalib, but the film had so much else to offer that he passed muster

Shatranj Ke Khilari



Sardar

actress and as a singer. Bharat Bhushan may not have made a very convincing Ghalib, but the film had so much more to offer that he passed muster.

MUGHAL-E-AZAM (1960)

Who knows for sure whether *Anarkali* actually existed, but K. Asif's epic starring Dilip Kumar as the rebellious Prince Salim and Madhubala as the beautiful courtesan and Prithviraj Kapoor as the unbending Emperor Akbar, is a landmark of Indian cinema.

The doomed love story between a prince and a commoner provided high drama and magnificent visuals. Plus there was Naushad's fabulous music. The film took 10 years to make but Asif spared no expense in giving his film a very lavish and authentic look—from the exquisite Zardozi embroidery on the costumes and the realistic weaponry to an exorbitant *Sheesh Mahal* set for the *Pyar kiya to darna kya* number.

It was a film made with passion and lives on in the minds of film buffs. Earlier, Filmistan's *Anarkali* (1953) with Pradeep Kumar-Bina Rai also entranced audiences... but didn't come anywhere close to K.Asif's labour of love.

SHAHEED (1965)

The story of Bhagat Singh holds great fascination for film-makers. The young freedom fighter was executed but not before he had given the British a tough time.

The most powerful version was undoubtedly the one starring Manoj Kumar as Bhagat Singh. The film was rumoured to be ghost-directed by the actor (he wrote the dialogue) but the official director was S Ram Sharma.

Prem Chopra played Sukhdev and Manmohan made a rather convincing Chandrashekhar Azad. Lyricist Prem Dhawan's *Mera rang de basanti chola* still brings tears to the eyes.

Utsav was beautiful to look at but bombed at the box office

Utsav

AMRAPALI (1966)

This Lekh Tandon opus wasn't a big hit, but it was a beautifully narrated story of the celebrated courtesan Vaishali who converted to Buddhism after donating all her wealth.

The film showcased Vyjayanthimala in the title role with Sunil Dutt playing the enemy kingdom's monarch, Ajatshatru, with whom she falls in love.

Amrapali was one of Vyjayanthimala's best roles, she looked great and gave a heartfelt performance. The film may be a bit kitschy, but it has been unfairly underrated.

SHATRANJ KE KHILARI (1977)

Satyajit Ray made just one Hindi film *Shatranj Ke Khilari* (he just made one more TV film *Sadgati* in Hindi) based on a story by Munshi Premchand.

SKK was set in the mid-19th century, when the decadent Wajid Ali Shah (Amjad Khan) ruled Awadh care-

lessly while the British looked for ways to annex his kingdom.

In the capital city of Lucknow two *zamindars,* Mirza Sajjad Ali (Sanjeev Kumar) and Mir Roshan Ali (Saeed Jaffery), do nothing but play chess all day. When they hear that the Company's troops are marching towards Lucknow, they run off to a quiet village to continue their chess game in peace.

The film is a sharp comment on the cowardice of the elite. The attention to period details and fine performances could only have been expected from a Ray film.

UTSAV (1985)

Utsav was based on a Sanskrit play but had some real characters like Vatsyayan, the writer of the *Kama Sutra.* The film, produced by Shashi Kapoor and directed by Girish Karnad, was a classic tale of romance set against a backdrop of palace intrigue and revolution.

Renowned courtesan Vasantsena (Rekha) falls in love with an impoverished Brahmin, Charudutt (Shekhar Suman). Samsthanak (Shashi Kapoor), the mean and ugly brother-in-law of the king, is in love with Vasantsena. Aryak (Kunal Kapoor) is plotting to overthrow the king and in the midst of all that confusion, Vatsyayan compiles the *Kama Sutra.*

The film had some great moments and was beautiful to look at, but bombed at the box office.

SARDAR (1994)

Of all the biopics of leaders of the freedom movement, Ketan Mehta's *Sardar* is the most interesting mainly because Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel has never been given his due in history.

Paresh Rawal put in a lot of hard work into essaying the title role, investing strength, intelligence and dignity in his portrayal.

Hindi cinema still hasn't imbibed the ability of Hollywood film-makers to make bold and controversial biopics. Directors are hamstrung by a welter of dos and don'ts but Mehta and writer Vijay Tendulkar made their points without offending the naysayers.

HEY RAM (2000)

Kamal Haasan's *Hey Ram* was a flawed epic, but it raised some very pertinent political questions and recreated the pre-Partition period with meticulous accuracy.

Saket Ram (Kamal Haasan) loses his wife (Rani Mukherjee) during a frenzy of communal violence, and is consequently influenced by Hindu fundamentalist ideology. Saket Ram is chosen by his group to kill Gandhi whom they blamed for the Partition. The story which cleverly blended fact and fiction, might have worked much better if Kamal Haasan had not been excessively self-indulgent.

Deepa Gahlot

Hey Ram

The story of *Hey Ram* might have worked much better if Kamal Haasan hadn't been excessively self-indulgent